The American Security State Hosts the World Cup

FIFA 2026, Immigration Enforcement, and the Soft Power Paradox of a Tournament Behind a Security Perimeter

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ABSTRACT

The 2026 FIFA World Cup arrives in the United States at a moment of acute contradiction. President Trump has positioned the tournament as a centrepiece of his 'Golden Age' soft power narrative — proof, rendered in stadium lights, that America remains the indispensable global host. Yet the same administration has constructed the most aggressive domestic immigration enforcement apparatus in modern American history, applied entry restrictions to nationals of 39 countries, and deployed ICE and Homeland Security Investigations personnel to all 16 host cities on a continuous operational basis throughout the tournament. This paper analyses the structural contradiction between these two simultaneous projects and traces its concrete consequences: visa denials for spectators from qualifying nations, the detention of players, the deportation of accredited team photographers, the exclusion of a FIFA-appointed referee, and the near-grounding of national squads. It examines the Save the World Cup Act and its failure to advance through Congress, the fiscal and reputational costs of reduced tourist arrivals, and the political collision between federal enforcement and Democratic mayors in host cities including Newark, Chicago, and Seattle. The paper argues that the tournament does not merely co-exist with the security state — it operates within it, and the world-audience it attracts will observe both simultaneously. The soft power dividend Trump expects depends on a premise — that the game dissolves borders — that American border policy directly contradicts. The paper concludes that the 2026 World Cup is the most revealing single case study of the gap between American self-image and the operational reality of its current governing doctrine.

Keywords: FIFA World Cup 2026, ICE enforcement, U.S. immigration policy, soft power, visa bans, Trump administration, Markwayne Mullin, Gianni Infantino, Iran football team, MetLife Stadium,

Delaney Hall, Save the World Cup Act, Democratic mayors, sanctuary cities, American public diplomacy, travel advisory

Introduction

The 2026 World Cup will bring the global game to three North American hosts: the United States, Canada, and Mexico. But in the United States, it will arrive at a moment when the very meaning of hosting has become highly contested. In the background, another kind of infrastructure is being prepared: the immigration and security apparatus that will determine who enters the United States and who does not.

Teams from 48 nations will play 104 matches in 16 cities across the United States, Canada, and Mexico between June 11 and July 19, chasing the 18-carat gold trophy of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association — FIFA — and a record $50 million in prize money. The final match will fall barely two weeks after America officially celebrates its 250th birthday, and will be decided at MetLife Stadium, just across the river from New York and roughly nine miles from Delaney Hall, the largest immigration jail on the East Coast, where Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) holds as many as 900 people — many of them from nations now competing for the Cup.

Fans, players, soccer officials, and dignitaries will gather in a country that no longer promises to take 'your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' Between January 20, 2025, and March 10, 2026, data examined by Human Rights Watch shows ICE agents arrested some 167,000 people accused of being in the country illegally in the 11 American host cities alone. That number will surely be higher by the time the Cup starts.

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What unfolds over the next 40 days will not only be games and competition. By staging its tournament in an America that lays its welcome mat behind an armed checkpoint, FIFA has put at risk the very organizational integrity it claims: a federation built on unity and fair play. The tournament did not pose the question of what kind of America was chosen to co-host the games; it merely scheduled the spectacle for prime time and put it in front of a billion-strong audience.

A Host Hostile to Immigrants

The United States will stage a sports extravaganza while lubricating the most aggressive domestic immigration enforcement machine in its modern history. The two displays of muscle and might will not run on separate tracks. They will collide in the host cities, in full view of an audience of billions.

For the better part of two years, the question hanging over the 2026 World Cup has been whether a country that has militarized its borders, detention institutions, and immigration process could credibly act as a gracious host. The tournament was always going to be a showcase. The only question was what kind — a hoped-for break from the story of America as a security state, or a continuation of President Donald Trump's aggressive immigration enforcement.

FIFA president Gianni Infantino describes the scale of the Cup as ‘three Super Bowls a day’ for a month. He promises an economic windfall in the tens of billions with more than ten million people in motion. Trump intends for the 2026 Cup to symbolize what he calls the Golden Age — a soft power spectacle rendered in stadium lights, proof that America remains the indispensable host.

Front Row Seat: $32,970

But contradictions flourish. A proclamation issued in June 2025 restricted entry into the United States for the games for 19 countries; by December 16 it had grown to 39. Haiti, which hasn’t qualified for the Cup for 52 years, faces full restrictions, which means Haitians without a valid visa cannot attend the games, even if they could afford tickets that mostly range from $60 to $10,990. A front-row seat at the final sold this month for $32,970.

Iran faces full restrictions; Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal face partial ones. The fine print exempts athletes and their staff. Thus, the players will arrive, but the ordinary fan traveling on a B-2 tourist visa from a barred nation will not. The government has also issued warnings against Colombia and co-host Mexico because of the administration’s confrontation with Venezuela.

The soft-power paradox is now literal. A tournament sold as a global gathering will be played in stadiums that exclude fans from nations that qualified to play. The team arrives; the country it represents stays home. FIFA’s marketing speaks of unity; the State Department’s cable traffic speaks of exclusion. Both are operating at full volume, at the same time, in the same country.

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The Host That Won't Pause

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin has cast the tournament not as a reprieve from immigration enforcement but as a saturation deployment. He declared in an ICE video on social media that ‘ICE and HSI will be out there every day.’ The deployment ostensibly seeks to combat counterfeit tickets, human trafficking, and drug smuggling. The agency is ‘not there to go round up mass individuals’ but is ‘always looking for the worst of the worst.’

The hedge is thinner than it sounds. DHS plans no mass operations inside the stadiums, but immigration law will not be suspended for the run of the tournament. Officials told various news outlets that ICE personnel have not been barred from making arrests at the matches themselves. Congress has been unable to close that gap. The Save the World Cup Act, introduced on March 19 by Rep. Nellie Pou of New Jersey and three Democratic colleagues, sought to prohibit enforcement within one mile of any World Cup match or fan festival. It was referred to the House Judiciary Committee but has gone nowhere. The Senate passed a bill providing an additional $70 billion for immigration enforcement, sending it to a reliably compliant House for expected approval just days before kickoff.

Ten of eleven host cities are run by Democratic mayors, six of ten states by Democratic governors. For two years, ICE has run deportation operations in the face of resistance from city and state governments. This raises the likelihood that ICE enforcement during the Cup could spill over into a highly publicized political showdown for the world to see.

Chicago Adopts ‘ICE-Free’ Zones

Newark is the clearest example, only nine miles from where the trophy will be lifted. Mayor Ras Baraka, a Democrat, sued the GEO Group — the private prison operator for the Delaney jail — almost the moment its contract was announced. Democratic Governor Mikie Sherrill’s health inspectors have been turned away from the building’s doors. In Chicago, Mayor Brandon Johnson signed orders carving out ‘ICE-free zones’ on municipal property while federal agents ran Operation Midway Blitz through the neighborhoods. The pattern repeats from Seattle to Boston: mayors and governors negotiating with their own federal government over the terms of hospitality just weeks before they are asked to

welcome the world.

Just last week, fighting erupted between protestors and GEO Group employees in front of Newark's Delaney Hall. The center has become a magnet for opponents of the Trump administration's immigration crackdown. Press reports noted the fisticuffs occurred in broad daylight, and protesters were pepper-sprayed by ICE enforcement officers.

Security Climate Contradicts Mission

Some of the cost is measurable in empty seats. Immigration attorneys warn that the political climate itself will deter people regardless of who is technically eligible. The National Immigration Forum notes that the visa freeze, paired with new social media screening, could keep travelers from affected countries away even though spectators are formally exempt. Amnesty International and allied groups issued a 'World Cup Travel Advisory' warning potential visitors about conditions in the United States.

Demand data trackers reinforce the warning. Nearly 80 percent of hotels across the host cities report bookings are running below forecast, citing visa difficulties and steep prices. Visit Seattle trimmed its World Cup revenue estimate for the city by about $100 million. Tracking organizations report that U.S. international arrivals have already fallen by 6.3 percent in 2025, a decline researchers partially attribute to perceptions of the administration's policies.

The deeper cost won't show up in any attendance figures. Haiti's grasp of a World Cup spot for the first time in more than half a century produced a team that could not safely train in its own country. Yet its flag will fly over American grass while its people are turned away at American consulates. The immigrant communities in host cities will watch the matches on their own televisions rather than walk into a plaza ringed by federal agents. None of this registers in a box office tally. The empty seat is the policy's truest measure, and it photographs poorly.

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The Carve-Out That Wasn't

The fine print always promised that participants, at least, would get through. The proclamation carved out an exemption for 'any athlete or member of an athletic team, including coaches, persons performing a necessary support role.' FIFA repeated

assurances for two years that team officials and accredited personnel would be waved past the wall. The carve-out was the administration's proof that enforcement and hospitality could share a calendar. That proof is not holding.

Iraq, back in the tournament for the first time since 1986, flew into Chicago to a welcome it did not expect. Aymen Hussein, the striker whose goal against Bolivia ended a 40-year wait, was held for nearly seven hours at O'Hare Airport and had his phone searched before officers released him to his teammates. No official reason was given. Talal Salah, the team's photographer, fared worse. He was detained more than ten hours and then denied entry outright. Iraq will document its World Cup appearance without its own photographer.

Dozens of accredited journalists from Iran and various African countries have been denied entry visas by U.S. authorities. The International Press Association issued an official letter to FIFA condemning widespread visa blockages as an unacceptable violation of press freedom.

United States Challenges Referee's Visa Status

Days before kickoff, Omar Artan, an award-winning soccer referee and the first Somali ever selected to referee a World Cup, flew into Miami holding a valid U.S. visa. He was turned back to Istanbul. Somalia sits on the travel-ban list; the exemption for match officials apparently did not reach the man meant to stand at the center of the field. FIFA named 52 referees for the tournament. One of them was sent home before he could blow a whistle.

South Africa, drawn to open the tournament against co-host Mexico, nearly missed its own training camp when the U.S. consulate in Johannesburg denied visas — without explanation — to the assistant coach and the team's head of security. The visas came through in the end, but a country forced to convene an emergency meeting to get its bench into the host nation is not a country being welcomed. And Iran, the most freighted case of all, watched its federation boycott December's World Cup draw in Washington after U.S. authorities denied visas to its officials. The team itself was cleared only at the last minute and shifted its training base from Arizona to Mexico.

Taken one at a time, each episode is explicable — an identity mix-up, an administrative bungle, a consular backlog, a security precaution. Taken together, they describe precisely what the carve-out was supposed to prevent: a host that runs the World Cup through a politicized security checkpoint rather than a celebration of unity and sport.

The Iran Knot

The cost lands on two reputations at once. America, which sold the Cup as proof that it remains the indispensable global host, instead furnishes evidence that it now screens the world before admitting its players, photographers, referees, and benches. FIFA President Infantino built the show on the premise that the game dissolves borders. The borders are answering back.

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The most ironic image the games create can be claimed by Iran. Earlier this cycle, President Trump accepted FIFA's inaugural 'Peace Prize.' Then he joined Israel in launching an attack on Iran. Now Iran's national team is scheduled to play on American soil under heightened security due to current world events. Iran is a guest at a festival hosted by a country that bombed it, whose wartime coalition assassinated its leader.

Infantino sold the World Cup 2026 as a celebration of global unity. Yet it will be staged by a co-host at war with one of its own competitors, behind a perimeter built on its own anxieties. America wanted the world to watch. The world will. The question is what it will see.

About the Author

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